

Russian Immigration and the Revitalization of German Jewry

Since 1990 a mass migration of Russian Jews has been under way, primarily to the United States and Israel. However, literally tens of thousands have also settled in Germany. The Jewish immigrants have since transformed the life of a community that had an uncertain future at best. Ironically, this massive population movement has certain parallels with a similar movement of Jews from East to West at the end of the Second World War when the concentration camps were liberated and thousands of displaced persons (DPs) moved across the Continent. Homeless, lost, and mostly destitute, many then resided—primarily in DP camps—on the soil of the nation that had almost succeeded in wiping out their people. In contrast to that earlier migration, however, Jews are now coming to Germany willingly, this time as seekers of a permanent stable home. This time they did not migrate in the aftermath of war, but nevertheless in a period of intensive change and insecurity. The East has moved west and the West has moved east, altering European spaces of identity that, typical of diasporas, no longer coincide with territorial boundaries.

In 1989, before the Berlin Wall came down, the point at which my main narrative begins, the story of Jewish life in Germany had improved, but it was not particularly optimistic. There were 20,000 to 30,000 Jews in the Federal Republic (West Germany), 6,000 in Berlin, and about 500 Jews in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), 200 in East Berlin.¹ Most were elderly and their numbers were diminishing. Then came the opening of the borders, followed by the disintegration of the Soviet empire. Those decisive years, 1989–1990, marked the beginning of a flood of immigration. Few Americans seem to be aware how this population shift has, in fact, saved the Jewish community in Germany from

certain extinction and made it the third largest in Europe, the ninth largest and fastest growing in the world. And few people, as the thesis of my book contends, understand how this migration and the reconstitution of the Jewish community in Germany may change our thinking about diaspora.

Today the German Jewish Community proudly announces a membership of more than 100,000 (estimated most recently at 108,000), with 12,000 in Berlin. Eighty-nine synagogues are under its aegis, ranging from the largest in Berlin to smaller ones, such as in Rostock in the East or Kassel in the West. In some, Russian Jews make up virtually the entire community. In fact, 85 percent of the Jewish population in Germany is from the former Soviet Union and since 1989, over 190,000 Jews have emigrated from that dissolved empire and its successor states, primarily from Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states. While the numbers indicate a sizable immigration, more importantly a closer analysis shows that not all Jews from the former Soviet Union, nor all Jews in Germany for that matter, are members of the official Jewish Community and therefore counted in these figures. An examination of the obvious question why all Jews are not official members reveals important idiosyncrasies about Jewish life in Germany, the relationships of German Jews to their immigrant brethren and of these “new Jews” among themselves.

Migration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Germany is not unprecedented. In the early decades of the twentieth century, before Hitler's accession to power in 1933, an uneasy peace existed between the so-called Ostjuden and their overwhelmingly secular German Jewish hosts. Eastern Jews were more religious, more Orthodox, and outwardly more clearly distinguishable. They were also generally poorer and more provincial. In Berlin many lived in the area called the “Scheunenviertel” (the barn quarter), a less than desirable part of town adjacent to the well-known Alexanderplatz, the scene of Alfred Döblin's famous novel of the same name. Coincidentally, I lived in this area when I did my research on Jews in the GDR in the early 1990s. At that time one could still see traces of Hebrew inscriptions on crumbling walls. The new “Ostjuden” who populate Germany today are also met with ambivalence, although the Community is officially committed to integrating them into German-Jewish life. Aware of how these large numbers of Jews would not only reinvigorate, but also repopulate a community that needed them, the social welfare arm of the Community helps them with housing, jobs, language courses, and navigating the complicated social system. Nevertheless, these Jews have a very

different outlook on what it means to live in Germany than the Community that receives them. In common, both groups suffer from hope and frustration.

The Jews from the former Soviet Union were often the victims of blatant anti-Semitism in their homeland—graffiti or attacks on synagogues, desecration of cemeteries, and public invectives against Jews by political figures were common occurrences. However, their relationship to the Holocaust itself and German history is less familiar and sometimes less fraught than for Jews in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. While they know about the genocide and its horrors, very often their personal nemesis was Stalin who murdered millions of Soviet citizens, including Jews, and sent millions of others to gulag labor camps in Siberia. They seem more immune to German history and the Holocaust because of the country's postwar isolation from the West. Buttressed by Soviet propaganda, they identify strongly with Russia's suffering at the hands of Hitler's army as proud Russians as well as Jews. It is quite common for aging Jewish war veterans from the former Soviet Union to display their red stars proudly in the Berlin Jewish Community, as if to acknowledge their immutable link to their former homeland. Others, who may feel more at home, state, even amid the beginnings of the anti-Semitism discussions of June 2002, "They [American Jews] keep asking me why I want to live here, but Germany does not mean fascism for me and America is not so great. I have lots of German friends. Why should I hate the whole nation?"² Many choose to live in Germany, sometimes selecting it over Israel or the United States, because in Eastern Europe Germany is seen as a major economic powerhouse and a land of economic opportunity. Some like its proximity to Russia and its familiar European heritage and others prefer Germany because it is presumed safer and more secure than Israel. Stories of Russian Jews being blown up on Israeli buses or in cafes do not encourage migration to the Jewish state, while Germany can provide the personal and financial security Russia was lacking. Others wind up in Germany more by chance than purpose, simply because of complications or idiosyncrasies of their immigration process as they enter the West via Vienna or Rome. Attraction to Germany rather than Israel also results from "Germany's liberal policy in accepting ex-Soviet Jews and a desire by many to live in a country that is both a solid democracy and a firm member of the European Union." Yet ultimately, Germans encourage Soviet Jews: "It is connected with its responsibility for the Holocaust. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991,

Germany established a liberal immigration policy for Jews."³ Although not all German officials or even all Jewish functionaries are happy with these immigrants' choices, no one could imagine barring Jews who willingly want to settle in Germany. Still, the demographic shift creates an opportunity for a new domestic German Jewish future and for positive international publicity for Germany.

Yet the story is even more complex and ambivalent when viewed from several sides—the German, the German Jewish, and the immigrants themselves—on issues of identity, belonging, and Jewishness. Before changes in the German citizenship law in 2000, which has made it easier for foreigners living permanently in Germany to become citizens after an initial waiting period, but more difficult to gain a quick haven, Germany had one of the most liberal asylum laws in Europe. But there was no "immigration law" per se. A liberal immigration policy toward Jews from the Soviet Union developed in 1990, when in the last days of the former GDR, according to sociologist Robin Ostow, "the de Maziere government, hoping to survive in some form, was looking for ways to lend itself legitimacy."⁴ In the words of this first elected minister president of the soon to be defunct GDR, "For humanitarian reasons, the GDR government is for the first time offering domicile in limited numbers to foreign Jewish citizens who are threatened by persecution or discrimination."⁵ Referring to these new openings for Jews, expert Jeroen Doornik calls this moment "between the fall of the East German socialist regime in the autumn of 1989 and the incorporation into the German Federal Republic a year later . . . a time of remarkable politics."⁶ The uncertainties of transition created opportunities for citizens to take initiatives, in this case toward encouraging state regimes, specifically the GDR, to admit Jews from the Soviet Union.⁷ After reunification, as Ostow continues in her 1992 report in the *American Jewish Yearbook*:

In the fall of 1990, the West Berlin Jewish community began to take over. In mid-September, with unification approaching, the West German government ordered its consulates in the USSR to stop processing immigration application forms from Jews and advised the GDR to do the same. On October 2, West Germany closed its border to Soviet Jews. From then until the end of the year, Soviet Jews continued to arrive illegally or semi-legally, i.e., with "invitations to visit relatives." . . . In the final months of 1990, Heinz Galinski, the president of the Central

Council of Jews in Germany and of the Berlin Jewish community, organized a staff of administrators and social workers for the Soviet Jews and publicly insisted that they be admitted to Germany on a non-quota basis and granted residence rights. He maintained this position against pressure from the German government, the Israeli government, and a large part of the membership of his own community.⁸

In January 1991, after German reunification, Soviet Jews were now admitted under the "Kontingenzflüchtlingengesetz" (quota refugee law) granting them rights ironically only accorded to the so-called ethnic Germans, whose relationship to contemporary Germany after many generations of living in remote areas of the Soviet Union is more imagined than real. This legislation was a turning point for Soviet Jewish immigration since it allowed masses of Jews to enter Germany as immigrants rather than on tourist visas as had previously often been the informal practice.

The special refugee status of these Jews was not the only reason that they were not always welcomed with open arms by the German Jewish community, many of whom had emigrated themselves in the 1970s during an earlier flight from the Soviet Union. Most of the newcomers—an estimated 80 percent—are halakhically not Jewish, meaning they do not have Jewish mothers or do not fulfill other requirements, such as an Orthodox conversion. Many claim they are Jewish because in the Soviet Union, Jews were considered a nationality that was marked plainly on the infamous fifth line of their passports, a category that did not distinguish how that Jewishness was determined. Even most of those who fulfilled the requirements of Jewish law had little or no formal Jewish education and knew little about Jewish traditions or rituals. In the words of Paul Spiegel, they "know they are Jews but they don't know what Judaism is."⁹ Further, their arrival put a financial, psychological, and emotional burden on the existing communities who simply did not have the infrastructure to handle such a large number of newcomers. They were often regarded as merely "using" their real or supposed Jewishness to get out of the Soviet Union for a better life in the West, or using the Jewish Community to make the best of a difficult situation, for example, to get social welfare or language instruction. In the unfriendly words of one German Jew, "They exploit anything that they can get for free."¹⁰ In this new situation, however, in the words of one former GDR Jew, "a minyan could now be arranged," which had frequently not been the case in East Germany. Still, the sheer need for

jobs, housing, education, and emotional support overwhelmed the Community structure. Many of these immigrants were also older and would never learn German;¹¹ many were well-educated and could not find equivalent work in Germany and simply had to settle for a lower professional status. Engineers, the largest professional group, as well as teachers, doctors, and intellectuals found their personal social worth as devalued as their credentials when they could not find acceptable work. The resulting anger, frustration, and jealousy on both sides were mitigated by the satisfaction of finally having a substantial Jewish Community in Germany whose future was no longer so bleak. While the newcomers are welcomed by the Community and by the German government, who are pleased that Jews want to live in Germany, it still adds a burden to Jewish and German institutions.

Whatever the attitudes, the Jewish community in Germany and especially in Berlin has been permanently marked by the presence of this new group, its culture, and its expectations. The Russian language dominates not only in the small congregations which are not infrequently almost completely Russian, but also in the larger communities like Berlin where it is common to hear only Russian in the Joachimstalerstrasse synagogue or in the Fasanenstrasse library. In fact, it can be said, as Michael May, a high-level Community administrator, claims, that the Community in Berlin operates literally "in Russian." This means that the employees, from secretarial to financial and service administration—from those who do accounts, taxes, and wages to those who perform kitchen help—speak Russian among themselves. The Community's monthly magazine *Jüdisches Berlin* (Jewish Berlin) is published bilingually in German and Russian and postings on the bulletin boards advertising goods and services are almost all in Russian. Jewish-Russian newspapers are popular as well. Russian children predominate in the Jewish elementary schools, however, not because of religious fervor, but as was patently made clear by one member of the Community, because the length of the school day and the provision of a warm meal. As Judith Kessler, a social activist and journalist who studies the immigrants and emigrated herself from Poland to Berlin in 1972, remarks, "The Germans, the Israelis, and the Poles complain that only Russian is spoken anymore. . . . They say, 'This is not my community anymore. It is no longer that which I remember from earlier. I am getting out.'"¹²

For the future of the Community, some of these cultural strains can be

overcome by increased political involvement on the part of the immigrants, for example, in the representative governing body of the Community. It is said that one cannot govern the Community anymore without either speaking Russian, as in the case of the former leader Alexander Brenner, who is Polish born and speaks Russian, or being a leader who speaks directly to the problems of the Russians. Such a case was Andreas Nachama, whose Greek-born father, Estrongo Nachama, was the esteemed cantor of the Community. Nachama was singled out at his election as a member of the first post-Shoah German-identified generation to lead the Berlin Community and made a special effort of accommodation toward the Russians.

The Jewish Community in Berlin is the largest, the most diverse, and the most contentious, if communal elections signify the attitudes of its members. In 2003, after one canceled election because of a scandal about questionable voting practices, the most recent community election in Berlin (November 2003) took place. This time it was also marred by acrimony and bitterness. Repeating the previous results, again over half of the fifty-five candidates and notably the executive council members are of Russian origin from the voting bloc optimistically named "Kadima" (Forward).¹³ Albert Meyer, a German Jew, was elected president. As a Pole, Brenner who came in second was the only candidate who was not a member of this bloc. This election was markedly different from previous ones when more "German" Jews of Polish origin were prominent. Also of note is the fact that Meyer, who is not Orthodox but Liberal, admits he only goes to synagogue once a month, and even wants to hire another Liberal rabbi for the Community. The last one, Rabbi Walter Rothschild, was unceremoniously fired when he displayed condoms as well as gave radical advice to his congregants. Meyer's greatest challenges are integrating Jews from the former Soviet Union, primarily through language courses, and improving the abysmal state of the finances and administration in the Community. He came on board without even a budget in place. Since only 35 percent of the Community's members even voted in the election, most likely reflecting the frustration and cynicism in the wider community, Meyer must enlist the support of over two-thirds of those who voted otherwise or not at all.

The public meeting for the Constitutive Assembly on January 6, 2004, that followed the elections captures some of the vicissitudes of the current Berlin Jewish Community. Allow me to share with you my experience of that evening. After entering the Fasanenstrasse community center, past the

guards and the security check, many of whom were Russian-speaking, I climbed the stairs to the large second floor 500-seat meeting room across from the kosher restaurant Arche Noah (Noah's Ark). Filled with what I presumed were members of the Community, but also, as I later noticed, with journalists, television cameras, and the stray visitor like myself, the atmosphere was upbeat, if not a bit unruly and chaotic. Many people stood on the sidelines chatting, others were greeting friends, and then some were taking their seats in preparation for the evening's festivities. Before the official presentation of the winning slate and the election of the Executive Council (EC) that apparently was already public knowledge, there would be the required speeches. These proved to be particularly interesting for what they showed about the past and future of the Community. The audience had some trouble settling down; the Community leaders and the twenty-one successful candidates who sat in parallel rows in the front of the hall, however, contributed to the unsettled atmosphere as many continued their private conversations and greetings. The entire environment seemed a little like an Orthodox shul (synagogue) where people move in and out and talk among themselves, seemingly unconcerned with any conventional propriety or protocol. With some help from a friend, I identified the new president of the Berlin Community: tanned, good-looking, and healthy, extremely youthful for his fifty-six years, and stylishly dressed. He obviously was going to distinguish himself from his predecessors in other ways than just his administrative abilities. Before the official activities began, Meyer walked over to the widow of the deceased and highly respected first president of the Berlin Community Heinz Galinski, as if to pay his respects to the "dowager queen," who sat in the front row. Then, the oldest member of the Community introduced the evening by first respectfully invoking the name of Galinski who, as he stated, proved Hitler wrong by forcefully leading the reborn Jewish community after the Shoah. The audience solemnly rose to honor Galinski's memory. His speech began with a reminder of current dangers "in a time when the security of every Jew is threatened."¹⁴ He continued to the obvious issue of integrating the immigrants and finally, he moved on, hoping to heal the more corrosive topic of the divisive election process, "We are all in the same boat."¹⁵ A series of long-winded speeches by local rabbis, one in German tinged with a Yiddish accent, followed.

The audience was, however, growing increasingly restless. Because of the comings and goings and the shuffling back and forth, it was quite

difficult to hear the speakers. A woman next to me, well-dressed, heavily made up, and decked out in fine jewelry, spoke, not surprisingly, in her Russian mother tongue to another similarly coiffed matron. It seemed to me that I had discovered a new international Jewish stereotype that I resisted acknowledging even with the smile it produced on my face. Although we had not been introduced or spoken, she looked at me knowingly during the speeches—as if to say “let’s get on with this, I have better things to do”—which seemed endless, verbose, and clichéd about the importance of Jewish identity and the need for a strong community in Berlin. Finally, the elections began with pro forma nominations and secret ballots that tried everyone’s patience. More people got up, circulated, and chattered on. It seemed as if everyone suddenly had to go to the restroom.

Having accomplished my goal, I left before the end to read the results in the morning papers. As demonstrated that evening, this slice of a complicated community coming to terms in their new elections with misused finances, bad blood, and voter inconsistencies did not present the decorum of a world that one might, even prejudicially, have associated with sophisticated German Jewry rather than less well-heeled Ostjuden. In the new representative assembly (EC) work obviously remains to be done. With the “Poles” absent from the leadership, it remains to be seen if the alliance of German Jews and Russians can bring the Community together, even though a few months later, one of the prominent German Jewish EC members resigned.

Aside from depicting the controversies, the scene also reminds us how ethnic divisions continue to plague the Jewish community. “Poles,” “Germans,” and “Russians” are all national and ethnic categories that one would hope would disappear in a Jewish community that is supposed to be based on religious rather than national or ethnic affiliations. Moreover, it is a community whose very existence depends on migration, integration, and consensus among diverse groups of Jews. Yet, as I have repeatedly pointed out, religion, which defines the Jewish Community, allows little diversity; Orthodoxy dominates, some Liberal (Conservative) synagogues fill out the picture, and no official Reform offerings are available, except for the controversial World Union of Progressive Jewry (WUPJ) still fighting for recognition. While well-integrated, the “Poles” who have become “Germans,” most of whom were DPs, are still not “German Jews,” who have centuries-wrought identity and tradition in Germany, and of course, the Russians are another story.

The Russians’ attitudes toward the Germans can indeed often be aggressive, either in words, deeds, or just attitudes. Many educated Russian Jews disdain “high” German culture and regard the classical Russian tradition on a par or even better.¹⁶ For many, this culture replaces the religious participation from which they are excluded or which they themselves reject. Nevertheless, it is reported that “the Community Center in Berlin now organizes chess tournaments and ballet evenings instead of rounds of Skat, Germany’s favorite card game.”¹⁷ One observer of the Düsseldorf community, whose comments are applicable to Berlin as well, humorously captures the Russians’ cultural appetite by entitling her report “Vitamin ‘K’ für Kultur.”¹⁸ And while I am on culinary and more profane matters, the popular supermarket Real in East Berlin now sells kosher solanka, a favorite soup from the Soviet Union (Ukrainian/Russian) that was a popular item on the menus of their most western satellite, the GDR. But to return to more sacred themes, at least to German Jews, it appears that the powerful German *Bildungstradition* (tradition of [moral] education), which also shaped German Jewish identity up to the Nazi period, no longer has the universal status it once had. This was neither the case for the Russians’ self-image nor for their regard of prominent German Jewish figures in the Community. As was flatly claimed by one observer, “You can’t win elections today in the Community by using flowery German and quoting from Goethe and Schiller.”¹⁹

Although Albert Meyer, a lawyer who studied business and administration, is strongly identified with this German-Jewish tradition, he is using a pragmatic, no-nonsense plan for solving the financial and administrative problems in the Community as well as pursuing Russian integration that will attract the new majority. However, as if to remind the public of Meyer’s origins, German-Jewish journalist/author Rafael Seligmann calls Meyer in an article about his election: “Jude, Preusse, deutscher Patriot” (Jew, Prussian, German patriot).²⁰ For Seligmann, who uses his own writing to prompt the Jewish Community to more action, Meyer’s “ethnic” as well as professional background fosters his unquestionable sympathies for the Russian Jews who are, in Meyer’s own words, “Menschen in Not” (people in need).²¹ Meyer’s background and the entire complex of relations also illustrate the increasing “ethnicization” of Jews in Germany.

Indeed, the immigrants are in need of all kinds of support. Although most of the Russian immigrants had little Jewish education or knowledge of tradition and rituals, some have tried to educate themselves and to

create links to the Community. This attempt at attachment has been done primarily through participation in what was called "life cycle events."²² Bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, circumcision (bris), weddings, and most of all Jewish burials have become significant links to the Community and to their sense of Jewish identity. These events, such as burials, as many as 150 a year, bring the entire family together; they can occasion even the building of tombs at great expense, as was reported to me, in odd shapes in the manner of an extravagant marble computer for a deceased technology entrepreneur. In a recent survey of the Jewish Community (2002) conducted by Judith Kessler, a Jewish burial was rated most important for Russian immigrants. To cite the study, "It is important for almost 80 percent of all Jews to be buried in a Jewish cemetery—above all this is the case for the immigrants even when among them one-third are atheists and the others haven't described themselves as anything. The relationship [to their Judaism] remains even without religious connections."²³ This "relationship" to a tradition that is often asserted, claimed, and felt rather than substantiated through the blood of maternal lineage or Jewish knowledge can bring these immigrants into the Community.

Still, the resentment goes both ways and the German Jews remain skeptical of the Russians' legitimacy as Jews according to halakhic principles. It is difficult to say if these attitudes are really only religious or pretense for other social or cultural problems with Eastern European Jews. It may be a mixture of Western snobbery (since it seems that Jews from the former East Germany have a better relationship to the Russians) or frustration with the deceit and corruption in the Community. Nevertheless, I know of one story of an esteemed young Jew who was dismissed from a religious Jewish institution in Berlin when it was discovered that his mother's conversion was not properly Orthodox. Whatever the reasons that halakhic regulation remains so powerful in a community that some might say can ill afford to be so conservative, many in the Community see the Russian Jews as exploiting them for their own benefit without giving much back. They even see the Russians as destroying the very foundations of the Community with different traditions or nonexistent practices. Many feel that they are siphoning off precious financial resources and even take away burial sites and seats in the synagogue. While these traditional milestones are important symbolic events that bind these immigrants to their families, to the local Jewish Community, and to established Jewish traditions, they are obviously also being interpreted more instrumentally. Many immigrants

are criticized for not reading Hebrew nor having any interest in a Jewish education. They are accused of playing a game that is expected of them to take advantage of the Community. As I will show later, it is a "game" that one scholar accuses the Community of playing as well.

But first, let us take a close up of one Russian Jewish immigrant who is angry and cynical about her experience in the Community. She has even compiled a book of interviews with other Russian Jewish immigrants who confirm her experiences. LD is a woman in her fifties, now a teacher, whose journey to Berlin took many twists and turns, beginning with her application for emigration from the Soviet Union in 1978 to her final arrival in Berlin in 1987. She and her husband, who is not Jewish, live with their son in a comfortable yet modestly furnished apartment in a pleasant middle-class section of Berlin. Approaching the apartment building and entering her apartment one might expect someone who is content with all the amenities she needs. She is an attractive middle-aged woman and very proud, clearly less well-off and showy than her Russian compatriot I saw at the Community meeting. She speaks forcefully, yet calmly about topics that have obviously caused her some anguish.

The fact that she and her husband originally wanted to go to Canada may explain some of her ambivalence about Germany. Apparently, a friend of her husband convinced them to come. She told me bluntly that Israel was out of the question because her husband was a "Russian"; in other words, he was not Jewish. This ethnic category, like the traditionally exclusive terms dividing "Germans" and "Jews," distinguishes her husband's situation, which has little to do with religion (since being Russian or German does not preclude being Jewish), but rather with accepted categories of belonging. They had suffered considerably in the Soviet Union since they filed for exit and were anxious to get out as soon as possible to wherever they could find refuge. They did not come as *Kontingentenflüchtlinge* (quota refugees). Their life was very difficult after their arrival since as is typical, their diplomas were not recognized and she and her husband had to go back to school. Immigration meant a reduction in self-esteem as well as income. In the beginning, LD notes, she had contact with the Jewish Community, but has since dropped out. She says bluntly, "The Jews in the Community think they are better [than we are]."²⁴

Her problem, as it is for many in her cohort, is not about "being Jewish," but rather about being a member of the Jewish Community overloaded with bureaucracy, rules, and financial obligations that she was

expected to fulfill. In her own sharp terms, LD found the community simply chaotic, "a circus."²⁵ Although she was the breadwinner for her family for a long time, she was still expected to pay her taxes to the Community. They would not take her poor economic situation into consideration. She feels herself to be Jewish, although she is not religious, her son who did not have a bar mitzvah even less, and her husband who is not Jewish remains completely excluded. She reminded me again that to be Jewish was not dependent on being a member of the official Community, but how one felt inside. However, she admitted that she felt equally marginalized in Russia and says that in the Soviet Union, "We were something different."²⁶ Although she does not feel "Russian," she admits that all of her friends are Russian Jews and that she has little to do with German Jews who have a different position in society and are separated from her by "money" and "class."²⁷ However, like the majority of immigrant Jews, she remains a convinced supporter of Israel at any cost and has contacts with non-Jewish Russians. LD's predicament is typical of many Jews from Russia: she stands in between, never fully accepted in either country, neither by the non-Jewish Russians nor by the German Jews.

Many other immigrants, even those who came directly to Germany as *Kontingentenflüchtlinge*, have had a difficult time, but for reasons unexpected. An outstanding and controversial ethnographic study of the Russian Jewish immigration by the German anthropologist Franziska Becker, *Ankommen in Deutschland: Einwanderungspolitik als biographische Erfahrung im Migrationsprozess russischer Juden* (Arrival in Germany: Immigration Politics as Biographical Experience in the Migration of Russian Jews), presents the sharpest analysis and the most stinging critique of their situation.²⁸ Using discourse analysis of interviews, case studies, and surveys of media coverage collected during her field work at refugee sites, she shows how the immigrants were often questioned about their "Jewish authenticity" even if they had the proper papers. She illustrates that the situation of these people in the Soviet Union was neither black nor white; they were always confronted neither with anti-Semitism nor with positive acceptance. Both experiences existed simultaneously in a more complex everyday life than the authorities in Germany expected. Consequently, she uncovers how many of them assumed Jewish identities as "victims" that the Community expected. She reveals shocking details from her case studies of immigrants being questioned about racial categories and whether "they looked Jewish" or asked whether they were lying because

their Jewish identity was based on ethnic rather than religious affiliations. In other words, their identity, according to Becker, was politicized: they had to take on the "victim" role expected of them, particularly toward the Holocaust, even if their Soviet experience was different, albeit also tragically shaped by Stalin's brutal anti-Semitic policies. For many, it became a constant necessity to prove that they were victims in order to be recognized as Jewish, by Jews as well as other Germans. Unlike in Israel or the United States, these Jewish immigrants had to assume a German-Jewish narrative of Holocaust victimhood and Soviet anti-Semitism that didn't necessarily belong to them in order to be accepted as Jews and be integrated into their new lives.²⁹

Such religious and social conflicts that may seem strange to Americans represent some of the major problems and contradictions these Jews have to confront. In the Soviet Union, under succeeding regimes in the twentieth century until Gorbachev loosened state authority in the now infamous perestroika and glasnost, Jews were a tolerated and sometimes less than tolerated minority. On the one hand, they often bore the brunt of anti-Semitism, sanctioned even by political parties such as the well-known Pamyat. On the other hand, many Jews did not practice their religion nor pass it on to following generations, either by choice or by circumstance. Thus, many of the Jews who immigrated to Germany were Jews only by dint of the famous "fifth point" on their internal passports that identified them "ethnically" as Jews. It was a mark that some have compared to the Nazis' "J" stamp in Jewish passports. While some had tried literally to erase their "Jewishness" from their passport to improve their domestic situation, when the opportunity came to go to Germany as Jews, they did everything they could to reverse this situation by trying literally to have their Jewishness reinscribed in their passports. However, merely acknowledging or even creating a Jewishness that wasn't there was enough to gain them special status for emigration to Germany, but not enough to allow them to become members of the Jewish Community. In short, they were Jews in name only.

The issue of authenticity—a central issue in the Jewish world—became a major sticking point not only within the German-Jewish community, but also between the Community and the German Foreign Ministry responsible for granting immigration permits. Standards vary as to who is defined as a Jew; stricter for the Community than for the ministry since the former only recognizes the halakhically required maternal lineage and the latter

recognizes both paternal and maternal heredity. In short, the Community recognizes only religion while the German government recognizes, in addition, nationality or ethnicity. However, German government authorities were certainly not about to decide who was, or was not, a Jew! Nevertheless, Jews continued to come—in fact, more Jews settled in Germany than Israel in 2002—19,000 compared to 18,000 (this includes non-Jewish family members). Rather than simply bemoaning this troublesome and even embarrassing situation, in the summer of 2003, for the first time a task force from the Jewish Agency in Israel came to Germany to assess the situation. They hoped to encourage young German Jews to look again toward Israel as their home. By the end of 2004, the Federal states sought to limit the immigration of former Soviet Jews to those who could work and did not need social welfare assistance. Unusually pessimistic about Jewish life in Germany, Paul Spiegel criticized this “selection” that puts Jews into categories and elicits bad memories, some would even say of Auschwitz.³⁰

The continued attraction of Jews to Germany raises many questions for the Jewish authorities in Germany and Israel, not only about demography but also about identity. However, the migration also sharpens tensions toward alternative Jewish affiliations, both religious and cultural, which either question or fall outside the rigid system of the *Einheitsgemeinde* (Unified Community) that controls the religious life of Jews in Germany and maintains Orthodoxy and halakhic standards. The growth in Germany of the World Union of Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) is one such example. Since many of the Jews who come from the Soviet Union do not meet halakhic criteria or have non-Jewish partners who consequently produce offspring who are not “Jewish,” they cannot become official members of the Community. They cannot participate in services nor send their children to religious school. Nevertheless, many participate in the cultural activities that the Community offers and benefit from that non-religious association. In Berlin, where the egalitarian service (men and women pray together) is part of the official Community and not part of the WUPJ, these Jews can benefit from both affiliations. However, in the rest of Germany, the two organizations—the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the WUPJ—vie, so to speak, for the souls of these immigrant Jews, as well as for money from the German government. For example, in 2003, after many years of negotiations, the Jewish Community signed an official “state treaty” with the German government, as the latter had with the Catholic and Protestant churches, which tripled its annual budget to

nearly 3 million euros. Paul Spiegel called it a “historical event,” and it proves that the German government is not only aware of the new Jewish community but also supports it and welcomes it.³¹ The WUPJ wanted some of these resources, as well as other monies destined for NGOs from the “Remembrance and Future Fund of the Foundation ‘Remembrance, Responsibility and the Future.’” In 2004, the WUPJ filed a lawsuit against the Community, although it was later retracted.

Founded in Germany in 1997, the Union has fifteen congregations in Germany (plus one in Vienna) from large cities like Munich to small towns like Hamlin. Its membership ranges from as few as twenty to more than one hundred, totaling three thousand, and may indeed offer an opportunity to “be Jewish” to these Russian Jews who halakhically do not qualify. Ironically today, the tradition of Reform Jewry that started in Germany in the early nineteenth century and became so identified with German Jewry had more success in the postwar era in the United States than in Germany. Two hundred years later, Reform Judaism is trying to reestablish itself in the country of its founding. With only lay leaders, no trained rabbis, cantors, or Jewish educators, the WUPJ has a rabbinical school at the University of Potsdam named for Abraham Geiger, an influential nineteenth-century Reform theologian, and founded a Jewish publishing house in 1999 in Berlin.

As part of the World Union of Progressive Judaism in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, the case of this organization speaks, in fact, to conflicts within the German Jewish Community with regard to the distribution of financial resources, personalities, and of course, religious practice when it comes to the Russian immigrants who represent the future of the Community. The WUPJ states quite openly in its material that it has “not been enthusiastically welcomed by the traditional-oriented [*sic*] German Jewish organizations which have controlled the distribution of the government-collected religious tax since the end of World War II.”³² This situation represents the issue of who speaks for the Jews in Germany. It has been created precisely by the opportunity to win over converts to progressive Judaism from the Orthodox establishment in postwar Germany. The German government tries to remain neutral by leaving these “internal” battles to the Community itself. However, as if to signal its honoring of the long-standing German Reform Jewish tradition, which the WUPJ follows, in July 2003, the minister of the interior attended the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the WUPJ in Berlin.

The battles between the WUPJ and the Community continue. One newspaper report claimed that the WUPJ wants to connect to their rich past and compete with the official representation of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. It reports that the Council under Paul Spiegel "avoids direct contact with the 'Union.' Letters of the (WUPJ) liberal Jews remain still unanswered."³³ However, in conversations with Spiegel in April 2004, he told me that he has been open to contact with the WUPJ and relations are improving.³⁴ Some Jewish leaders find their tactics too aggressive in that they enlist American Reform Jewish congregations to petition against the official Community. In August 2004 an apparent agreement was reached.

The battle among various factions as to how the German Jewish Community will be constituted and defined will have to address the many young Russian Jews who have come to Germany or are born there. The meeting in January 2003 of the Winter University of the Union of Jewish Students in Germany coalesced some of these central conflicts around identity and belonging that also plague the fifteen thousand Jews in Germany between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Most of them, as in the larger community, come from the former Soviet Union. Thus, this meeting on the topic *What is Judaism?* went to the heart of the identity issue even more directly in their eyes than those of the Jewish community organizations. As Uriel Kashi, the current president of the organization, has said, "Our goal is to listen and discuss in a Jewish atmosphere, to learn about our Jewish identity."³⁵ For Julian Voloj, the former president of the German student group and now leader of the 200,000-strong European Union of Jewish Students, the work they do on the Europe-wide level for those Jews from west to east is even more important than the grand plans of the expanding European Union (EU). This group also has a regularly sponsored the pan-European Summer University where five hundred young Jews gather to discuss issues that concern them as Jews and as Europeans. Voloj sees his organization as the future of a new European Jewish identity, even though he admits that the fact that he and Michel Friedman, the former director of the European Jewish Congress, are "German" has traditionally been regarded with some skepticism by other European Jews.

Consequently, Jews in Germany who lead important European organizations must also fight the same kind of prejudices that American Jews still feel for Germany. As part of a European organization of Jews and especially of Jewish young people, Jews in Germany can gain status and

support for their fast-growing community that has brought Eastern and Western Jewry together again in an unexpected way.

Even more recently, a sociologist colleague and I met with two small groups of university-age Jews (August 2003 and December 2003); most were from the former Soviet Union and belonged to the Jewish Student Organization, which is decidedly more conservative in its communal nature. Two groups of about fifteen attended these informal sessions in the modest clubhouse located in the basement behind the Joachimstalerstrasse synagogue, next to the bagel shop and bookstore I introduced in chapter 1. In both cases the participants formed a mixed group as to gender, nationality, and political orientation. Given that the choice to belong to this group already implies commitment to some form of Jewish identity, it cannot be said that these students are typical of all young college-age Jews in Germany, especially those of Russian origin. Some wanted to emigrate from Germany to Israel or to the United States; many were increasingly fearful of the rise of anti-Semitism; all of them supported Israel. At the first meeting, their reactions focused on their feelings about living in Germany, their definitions of Jewishness, and their personal and professional futures. Two students from the WUPJ-sponsored Geiger Rabbinical School were the only ones who were adamant about staying in Germany in order to contribute to a future Jewish life. The hopeful and upbeat ideology of the WUPJ certainly seems to have rubbed off on them.

The students in the second session were generally more skeptical about their future in Germany as anti-Semitic incidents had increased since the summer when the Iraq war had ended. They were more outspoken about leaving Germany, although one young actor who had gone to the United States, Canada, and Israel admitted that he returned after his many travels because "he missed Germany and he learned to appreciate it in many ways."³⁶ They also had to admit, including the actor, that the unstable economic situation in Germany influenced them as much as political factors. Interestingly, these young "German Jews" leave Germany for North America because of financial insecurity and Russian Jews come to Germany to find a better economic life. It was a young woman from France, however, who provided a comparative and alternative perspective when she defiantly proclaimed, "I would rather live in Germany than in France."³⁷ She proved, as many other observers have noted, that attacks on synagogues, schools, and individuals in France raise more serious questions about an anti-Semitism that is clearly more dangerous there than in

Germany. Obviously, Germany's special past creates associations and fears that are less grounded in reality than in the continuing resonance of history. Contrary opinions also emerged from other young people from the former Soviet Union I interviewed who live and work in Germany with plans to stay. The diversity of opinions found among young people from the 1990s to 2004 reminds us that Jews, even in Germany, do not speak with a unified voice and that immediate political events can shift attitudes precipitously.

No matter what course their individual lives take, the future of a German and European Jewry will certainly depend on the enthusiasm, energy, and literally the staying power of these young people. Clearly, it will also depend on the political, social, and economic environment in which they find themselves in as to whether they will make Germany their permanent home. The shifts in attitudes since 1989 demonstrated in this study remind us that Jews in Germany, especially the majority Russian Jews, no matter how connected they are to the Community, define themselves as "Jews" and this affiliation affects their feelings about the country. Attention to being Jewish, no matter what their religiosity, affiliation, or membership, still makes a decisive difference to them.

Whether a new German Jewish space will evolve seems at this point dependent on how the former Russian Jews in Germany choose to become Jewish. They may choose the more religious path, as part of the Community, or the more liberal as part of a more progressive Jewish religious movement that could more easily recognize them even if only their fathers are Jewish, or as only ethnic or cultural Jews. It will also be important that the Community consider expanding its options for recognizing Jewish identity in its many forms, recognizing that it may not be possible to define the official Jewish Community exclusively in halakhic religious terms. Albert Meyer seemed at least to be hinting at greater inclusion in many of his remarks after the election. The choice of spouses, the birth and raising of children, and the potential "intermarriage" of Jews from different European countries who create a new European Jewry bred of mixed national Jewish parentage will certainly be criteria for establishing Jewish lives.

It continues to be of utmost importance, at least, to welcome the interest and enthusiasm for "things Jewish" in Europe even if they are created and promoted by sympathetic non-Jews. These "discursive communities," both real and virtual, in which Jewish topics are discussed and represented publicly, such as in cultural festivals, exhibitions, or museums, contribute

to a significant Jewish presence in Europe. This presence is not vanishing, nor is it just virtual; it is a small yet importantly symbolic group of communities who have a voice in their individual countries that supersedes the power of their numbers. There is no question that the freer movement of these peoples and their ideas around Europe, as well as their connection to other world Jewish communities, will enhance the creation of Jewish spaces. The continued exposure and education of young people in succeeding generations to the wide spectrum of "Jewishness" will also contribute to supporting a new European Jewish identity.

Berlin and Germany are the most interesting stage for identity-building since they intertwine different kinds of Jews from East and West and different ways of being Jewish, from Reform to Orthodoxy. In the future, Jewish life, if it is to continue, will have to negotiate this rocky terrain that for most is paved more with cautious optimism than gold. Perhaps in the face of negative demographic figures and narrow definitions of Jewishness, one has to extend the position of Boris Feldman, editor of the Russian-language weekly *Russkii Berlin*, who emigrated from Latvia in 1990. He states, "The revival of Jewish life in Berlin is the revival of Russian-speaking Jews. . . . I think that today we shouldn't compare with the past. I don't look back, I look ahead . . . I think that Jewish life in Germany is still ahead of us."³⁸ What this future means for Russian Jews depends on how they shape a new German-Jewish community in this very unique context.

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